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ABSTRACT

The chair of a newly-formed Committee on Writing, whose charge it was to define writing-intensive courses and make recommendations on a college-wide writing program, was forced to examine her own beliefs and priorities about language and learning. The committee had at least one member from each academic division, met weekly during the semester, and communicated during the week through memos, shared readings, and informal conversations. Even as the committee members read about foundering or defunct writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs, it soon became clear that the committee itself was a living example of the deep philosophical differences that had haunted pioneering WAC programs. Despite their differences, committee members did share common purposes, including the desire to improve writing and learning, to make students' experiences more productive, and to help students become more self-reflective writers and more critical thinkers. A confrontational approach to disagreements can be destructive of what could be challenging and productive relationships between people in diverse fields with diverse views. (RS)

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First Steps: New Faculty, New Writing Across the Curriculum Program

by Patricia Dunn

One advantage to initiating writing across the curriculum in the 90's is that one can look at retrospectives offered by people whose institutions have been involved with such programs for the last 10 to 20 years and who give invaluable advice on the inception of new programs--what steps to take and what pitfalls to avoid. Eight years ago, Toby Fulwiler warned of large classes and resistance to expressive writing as obstacles to the movement, and Knoblaugh and Brannon reported in 1983 that many WAC programs were "little more than grammar across the curriculum" (465). In a 1983 CCC essay, David R. Russell related how two promising WAC programs in the 1950's, one at Colgate and one at Berkeley, died out after losing their respective battles with traditional ways of teaching. Parker and Goodkin, in 1987, blamed "transmission views of language" as barriers to what they viewed as necessary to real WAC development: the "retheorizing" of teaching (179). And Edward M. White, in his 1991 ADE essay, "Shallow Roots or Taproots for Writing Across the Curriculum," said that vital elements of WAC such as writing centers and ongoing faculty workshops are often the first items axed in budget cuts.

These are sobering thoughts. As chair of our newly-formed Committee on Writing, whose charge it was to define writing-intensive courses and make recommendations on a college-wide

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writing program, I was forced to examine my own beliefs and priorities about language and learning. Formed in the fall of 1991, our eight member committee had at least one representive from each academic division. Our report, due by the end of the semester, needed the support of diverse voices in our committee because they represented opinions in the larger college community. I knew that our disagreements would have to be negotiated and resolved before the finished document moved on to the next step of the process--approval by the Curriculum Committee and College Council.

We met every Friday last semester and communicated during the week through memos, shared readings on WAC, and informal chats over the photocopy machine. The short time period allotted for our task allowed only a brief time to ponder complicated issues. Meanwhile blank pages waited to be filled in with something we could all endorse.

Even as we read about foundering or defunct WAC programs elsewhere, it soon became clear that our own committee was a living example of the deep philosophical differences that had haunted pioneering programs. Regarding writing, some members were concerned with product, others with process. Some focused on "catching" student deficiencies, while others hoped to change student attitudes. Views of learning differed also. Some saw writing as a display of knowledge; others saw writing as a means to knowledge. The question I faced as chair was how to keep these substantial differences from pulling the committee apart. If everyone insisted on views held in September, our committee

would not last a month.

It was at the height of our disagreements that the November, 1991 issue of College English came in the mail, with Dan Mahala's thought-provoking piece, "Writing Utopias: Writing Across the Curriculum and the Promise of Reform." Mahala agrees with Parker and Goodkin's criticism of established WAC programs that they have veered far from James Britton's original vision in Language Across the Curriculum to celebrate expressive writing as having value in itself and to explore connections between language and learning. Although expressive writing does have a role today in WAC programs, it is not employed to challenge or even broaden traditional literacies, but simply as a stepping stone to the more "rigorous" forms of academic discourse.

Mahala argues further that most WAC programs and textbooks today smooth over conflicts within disciplines regarding acceptable evidence and discourse. They paint for students a harmonious picture of fields that have, in reality, disagreements within and among themselves (780). Mahala points out that in the interest of getting students to "think as" chemists, historians, sociologists, and so on, WAC promoters bypass currently raging intradisciplinary crises and debates. In Mahala's ideal program, students would not be given this bland view of literacy but would instead become participants in a discipline-wide challenge to traditional forms of knowledge-making. They would see they had a real stake in advocating cultural knowledge and individual voice.

Reading this article affected me deeply because I realized he was right. The radical changes in academic discourse and practice that I had read about in graduate school theory classes

were not even being referred to in most how-to articles on WAC I had been reading recently. What alarmed me even more was that remembering the heated discussions that had taken place so far in our early Committee on Writing meetings over such things as paper load, assessment, and deficiencies, I knew that now was not the time to introduce to the committee the even more volatile issues Mahala was rightly concerned with.

While I agreed with Dan that there should be alternative literacies and that students should play a part in helping them become a reality, I also knew that to confront my already arguing committee with this issue at this time would be disasterous. One frustrated committee member had already issued an ultimatum which cooler heads had to defuse in order to stop people from leaving the table. On the one hand, I could understand Dan's impatience with WAC programs for emphasizing common ground rather than dealing with the very real differences in world view that exist not only between disciplines but between members of the same discipline. On the other hand, to exacerbate differences at this point would be counterproductive to our substantial common purposes, which were these:

- to improve writing and learning (even though we might not all agree yet on what exactly that meant)
- to make students' experiences at our college and in our classrooms more productive for them
- to help students become more self-reflective writers and more critical thinkers.

As people, we all had other things in common: we were all

interested in writing; all active members of our individual disciplines; all willing to spend non-compensated time studying WAC theory and practice, writing about it to each other, and attending frequent meetings. I decided that if a new WAC program was going to survive even its planning stage, the planners would have to concentrate on and work with their similarities rather than their differences. A cooperative approach that appeals to a common ground may, indeed, be a compromise of sorts. But having such a committee intact provides what was not there before--a forum in which such important philosophical dialogues may eventually take place.

Advocates of a WAC pedagogy that actively challenges traditional views of language and learning often place themselves, as does Mahala in this article, outside the establishment and promotion of WAC programs. Those working to establish such programs do not have the luxury to critique from the outside and must do the best they can within their particular circumstances. Also, those groups accused of clinging to an entrenched and oppressive view of literacy and learning cannot be viewed as a monolithic whole. They are individuals. They hold whatever pedagogical approach they do because they have some reason to believe it works, yet they would not be involved in WAC if they believed they had nothing to learn. The fledgling WAC enthusiasts at my college are a generally open-minded lot with an invaluable sense of humor. A confrontational approach to disagreements, especially if it is attempted too soon, can be destructive--not of traditional pedagogy, which might be desirable, but destructive of what could be challenging and

productive relationships between people in diverse fields with diverse views. In addition, an "us" vs. "them" view today becomes paradoxical when in many ways "we" are "them." Like it or not, we have become the administrators, the institutional representatives that reformers have always railed against.

Binary opposition and its limiting "either/or" mentality is part of the traditional discourse we would like to see modified. If we are truly advocating new ways of knowing, we need a more cooperative view of people who might disagree with us, and a "both/and" approach to disagreements. We must play Elbow's believing game, "embracing contraries" that we inhabit every day.

There are risks. Negotiation can become unacceptable compromise, and giving in can become giving up. But we cannot allow convictions to become dogma, or resolve to become obstinacy. To negotiate the fine line between knowledge and inquiry, we need to be, as Paulo Freire puts it, "less certain of our certainties."[1]

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[1] Quoted by Ann E. Berthoff in the Foreward to Freire and Macedo, Literacy: Reading the Word Reading the World. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1987.

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